

EAST GERMAN MATERIAL CULTURE:  
BUILDING A COLLECTIVE MEMORY

by

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## ABSTRACT

One way of remembering life as it was lived in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is through everyday objects. This thesis looks at the *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life) to understand the interaction between the East German state and society through material culture. Museums have collected East German material objects and popular culture with the help of the internet and television has assisted to both preserve and re-imagine the memories of the past.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the cultural and economic significance of material culture of the German Democratic Republic both before and after 1989. It seeks to understand, how and why ex-GDR consumer objects have emerged as new historical markers of the socialist experience and collective memory. Additionally, the thesis explores whether East Germany, a socialist country that was despised for its poor quality and quantity of consumer goods can be remembered after the fall of the Berlin Wall as a genuine consumer society.

While the GDR no longer exists, its legacy is still very much alive in the renewal and revival of a number of significant material objects. It has even manifested itself into what is called *Ostalgie*, nostalgia for all things from the former GDR, including such items as the *Trabant* (an East German car), the *Ampelmännchen* (traffic light figure) and *Florena* body lotion.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BRD—*Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Federal Republic of Germany, FRG (West Germany).

DDR—*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, German Democratic Republic, GDR (East Germany).

FDJ—*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, Free German Youth (East German youth organization).

HO—*Handelsorganisation*, Trade Organization (East German state authority in charge of shops and stores).

MfS—*Ministerium für Staatsicherheit*, Ministry for State Security or “Stasi” (secret state police in East Germany).

NES/NESPL—New Economic System/New Economic System of Planning and Leadership (a plan to modernize and introduce some market mechanisms into the East German planned economy in the 1960s).

SBZ—*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*, Soviet Occupation Zone (the official name of East Germany from 1945-1949).

SED—*Sozialistische Einheitspartei*, Socialist Unity Party (ruling communist party of East Germany).

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## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, one of the most published media images was of East Germans<sup>1</sup> driving their *Trabants* over the border to West Germany and spending their ‘welcome money’ on bananas and jeans, items which had been previously unattainable. This image has also been depicted in a mural painting by Birgit Kinder on the Berlin Wall, which shows a *Trabant* crashing through the Wall in the anticipation of experiencing freedom and consumption.<sup>2</sup> The *Trabant*, otherwise fondly referred to as the “*Trabi*”, was a well-known but hard to obtain vehicle in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). However, after 1989, its production was discontinued when East Germans could buy better quality vehicles from Western manufacturers such as Audi or BMW.

With the euphoria surrounding unification, it seemed as if everything from the GDR was quickly exchanged for Western material goods and it appeared as if the *Trabi* and everything connected to the GDR was destined for the landfill. For Western observers, it looked as if capitalism had finally achieved victory over socialism through the guise of consumerism. East Germans thought that at last their consumer dream had come true, they no longer had to be patient with the inferiority and shortage of GDR material goods. Finally, with the change in monetary policy and exchange rate close to 1:1 in monthly income, East Germans could now enjoy the Western world of comfort, wealth and prestige with their *Deutschmark* (DM).

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<sup>1</sup> To provide simplicity in this article, I have capitalized “East” and “West” when used as a noun and adjective both before and after unification in 1990.

<sup>2</sup> A picture of the wall mural can be found on Birgit Kinder’s website.

Despite their initial enthusiasm for Western products, by 1991 consumers began demanding that their old products and brands of the ex-GDR be brought back. Rising unemployment, political pessimism, economic recession, and a growing social anxiety instigated new nostalgia for the stability and solidarity of the old days. It even manifested itself into what is called *Ostalgie*—nostalgia for all things from the former GDR.

Since the *Wende* (literally, the “turning point” in English, which refers to the changes associated with East and West German unification), the existence of the *Trabant* has evolved and become somewhat of a cult object for the GDR. Additionally, it has achieved a symbolic meaning far beyond its use and exchange value. This nostalgia exploded into the creation of numerous *Trabi* clubs both in East and West Germany, websites devoted to the car, and images of the vehicle adorning postcards, t-shirts, games, books, and calendars. The *Trabant* is an example of material culture that developed after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and it serves as a metaphor for the struggle of East Germans to maintain and develop their own collective memory of the GDR within the demands of the capitalist West. While the old GDR does not exist formally, its legacy is still very much alive these days in the revival of the *Trabi* and a variety of other significant products of material culture.

This thesis looks at the *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life) to understand the interaction between material culture and the East German state and society before 1989, as well as the evolution of these material objects since then.<sup>3</sup> There have been numerous debates about how to understand the history of the German Democratic Republic since the symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall in trying to find balance between “the

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<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth book on the relationship between society and material culture, see: Miller.

very real power of the ruling communist SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei*, Socialist Unity Party), and the experiences and actions of the vast majority of East German citizens” (Fulbrook 609). During the course of the 1990s, a shift can be identified in the academic and political writings of East German history to reflect upon the everyday aspects of life in the East, rather than a view of the GDR as strictly a totalitarian ‘Stasi state’ (Cooke, Representing East Germany 103; Fulbrook 608-609). Although there is still no consensus whether this is the correct approach to recording the history of the GDR, the study of the everyday and more specifically in this thesis, material culture in East Germany, does offer some insight into the lives of East Germans and the particularities that made up the socialist state of the GDR.<sup>4</sup>

The word “culture” is complex and defies a single definition. Originally, “culture” derived from the Latin root *colare*, and was “associated with activities of preservation, of tending to and caring for” (Benhabib 2). For example, Romans viewed agriculture as a “cultural” activity. During the Romantic period, culture represented “the shared values, meanings, linguistic signs, and symbols of a people, itself considered a unified and homogenous entity” (Benhabib 2). However with the emergence of Western modernity as a capitalist commodity economy, with a rationalized scientific worldview, and a bureaucratic administrative control, the root meaning of culture has changed. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, culture has come to include material culture as a subset of culture. Anthropologist Daniel Miller writes, “In short, our culture has become to an increasing degree a material culture based on an object form” (Miller 3). Miller suggests that:

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<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on the methodology of GDR history, see: Ross; Epstein.



... the very physicality of the object which makes it appear so immediate, sensual and assimilable belies its actual nature, and that material culture is one of the most resistant forms of cultural expression in terms of our attempts to comprehend it.

(3)

Additionally, given that culture (as it is often defined in terms of art, literature, drama and music) was so closely patrolled in the former East Bloc, the study of material culture has evolved as an alternative or different way of understanding the past. In the secondary sources used in this thesis, “culture” is used interchangeably with the term “material culture” because the cultural values, signs and symbols of East German people are expressed through objects of material culture. In many cases, culture in the form of music, literature and drama have become part of this material and pop culture, or they have made a commentary on material culture.

Therefore, material culture can be understood as the relationship between a society and consumer good that is bought, used, and consumed in a specific geography within a certain timeframe. Furthermore, historian Ten Dyke refers to material culture as “the set of all physical things that people create, modify, exchange, store and/or use in the context of human society and culture,” and she refers to “the social relationships, actions and meanings that are implicated in these processes” (254). The term is used in this thesis to sum up all the products that surrounded people in their daily lives within the German Democratic Republic, including such items as washing detergent, coffee, body cream, TVs, and cars. The physicality of these GDR products, that they can be experienced through sight, touch, taste, smell, and sound are manifestations of culture

and have helped to revive collective memories of the past while creating new meaning and significance for East and West Germans, young and old.

Concerning the connection between material culture and memory, Eli Rubin writes, "Objects in everyday life are the most important receptacles of the memory of that everyday life, (and) they are the most readily available link to that past" (Plastics and Dictatorship 6). Collective memory, according to Aleida Assmann, exists through the communication of memories in society and can be shared culturally through images, symbols, signs, and objects of material culture (31-50).<sup>5</sup> These objects help to elicit not only the memory of oppression in the GDR state that is often remembered by the conservative Western Cold War view, but also the happier memories of births, marriages, family gatherings, and vacations (Rubin, Plastics and Dictatorship 500). East Germans have recalled and recognized their memories collectively in society, but their memories have been subject to change and have responded to outside pressures from society, especially from the West.

The second chapter of this thesis begins with an overview of the feelings and expectations East Germans had towards Eastern material objects before the fall of the Berlin Wall. While GDR leadership lectured against the capitalism of the West, East Germans noted the rise in living standards and income of West Germans and envied their freedom and affluence. Although the GDR did make advances in rebuilding their own economy and guaranteeing a life without poverty for most, it never compared to the abundance of the West. Persistent shortages and long waiting lists for consumer goods such as television sets and cars made East Germans resent their own government who were viewed to be unable, or unwilling to improve the material living standards of the

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<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth book on the sociological background of collective memory, see: Halbwachs.

GDR. Once East Germans could watch Western television programs in the GDR, they constructed their own image of the West based on advertisements. These advertisements offered a greater quality and quantity of products that could only be accessible in the GDR through the *Intershops*<sup>6</sup> and East Germans could only afford these goods if they had Western currency, which most did not possess (Dennis and Kolinsky 3).

The third chapter discusses the excitement and euphoria East Germans felt when the Berlin Wall came down because of the material wealth they thought they would gain, in addition to freedom and democracy. The East's dissolution into the much larger and richer West Germany was at a speed that no other ex-communist society went through. Moreover, one of the many reasons for the collapse of the GDR was the sense of injustice felt by its citizens that their state did not provide adequate material goods in return for their hard work and commitment. After the 2+4 talks with the two German States and the United States, France, Britain, and the Soviet Union, as well as the currency union between the two German states, it was impossible to look backwards (Haftendorn 284ff). Soon, East Germany was overwhelmed by Western laws and institutions, consumer products, and popular culture. The East German economy virtually collapsed with the competition from the West (Theil 18).

As a result of the speedy "annexation", East Germans began to embrace their own consumer culture as a defense against the West in the form of *Ostalgie*. They recognized that Western goods were often cheap, tasteless, offensive, and manipulative, while East German goods were attributed with highly positive characteristics, such as honesty, beauty, functionality, and value for money. Over time, East Germans acquired an emerging regional pride for their once disdained material objects. In addition, West

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<sup>6</sup> More about *Intershops* in Chapter Two.

Germans also began to be interested in GDR material goods for reasons of fashion, sentimentality for their own past, and access to new markets.

Finally in the fourth chapter, the actors involved in remembering the material culture and examples of this material culture are given. Movies, books, music, foodstuffs, and household goods have all helped to elicit and retain the memory of a divided past. These examples of material culture have been able to speak on many different levels and have been of interest to politicians, journalists, curators, East and West Germans, youth, television hosts, historians and intellectuals. Moreover, it has been recognized that consumer goods can be used as one of the 'markers' of a collective memory of the GDR, but it has also been observed that the biography of these commodities can undergo a series of transformations and changes in their meaning. While referencing the past, many of these East German material goods that were once disdained have ironically developed into popular commodities.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the cultural and economic significance of material culture of the German Democratic Republic before and after 1989. It seeks to understand how and why these former GDR consumer objects have emerged as new historical indicators of the socialist experience and become part of a collective memory. Additionally, the thesis explores whether or not East Germany, a socialist country that was despised for its poor quality and quantity of consumer goods can be remembered after the fall of the Berlin Wall as a genuine consumer society. In the absence of state structure and conventions, material objects have become visual reminders of a collective memory of the German Democratic Republic, but they have also reinvented themselves.

## **Chapter Two: EAST GERMAN CONSUMER CULTURE BEFORE THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL**

### **2.1 The Challenges of Consumption**

Following the years after the Second World War, Germany was a site of destruction, ruin, misery, and chaos. Citizens were faced with economic hardships, material shortages, and broken families. It soon became clear that meeting the needs of the consumer would be important for establishing state legitimacy and separate identities for East and West Germany. Thus began the ideological rivalry between the two Germanys that would make consumerism a point of contention throughout their existence as separate states (Landsman 16).

The Socialist Unity Party was confronted with two major problems when forming the GDR: on the one hand, they had to figure out how to provide enough material goods for East Germans and on the other hand, they had to determine how to do it without compromising its socialist ideology on consumerism. The historian Betts asks, "How could consumerism be reconciled with state socialism's 'dictatorship over needs?'" (748). In other words, 'dictatorship over needs' means the social formation that organizes production from one administrative center (the SED) that exercises political control over the needs of the populace. It is based on the ideology of socialist egalitarianism that decides for consumers which needs are 'real' and which are 'excessive' (Luthar 233). Therefore basic needs were considered 'real' and everything else was 'excessive' in the GDR, unless a citizen worked extremely hard for those extra luxury goods. Steiner writes, "The state set wages and prices and administered the supply of goods with the aim of eliminating the interaction between supply and demand" (167). However, this aim was more theoretical than real and although the state attempted to limit and constrain

consumer behaviour, it was never fully successful. Despite the opposition socialist ideology had towards consumerism, the SED promised a golden future of material wealth to GDR citizens that would soon rival the West. Material reconstruction of the GDR was supposed to be the anchoring point of the socialist utopia that would give new direction and meaning to East German lives (Kaminsky 21; Veenis 21).

## **2.2 The Politics of Consumer Culture in the GDR, 1949-1989**

Consumption can be seen as a driving cultural, political, and economic force in the GDR history. In the German Democratic Republic, the socialist party endorsed hard physical labour in the workplace as a way of reaping the benefits of consumerism. They often quoted the phrases: “the way we work today is the way we live tomorrow” (Betts 749) and “to each according to his own work” (Kopstein 188) in the early 1950s as a way of encouraging a disciplined work ethic. While West Germany had high unemployment in the early 1950s, the GDR soon began to suffer from severe commodity shortages at the same time. Nevertheless, by the mid-1950s it appeared as if hard work was paying off because an ‘Economic Miracle’ (*Wirtschaftswunder*) was happening in both East and West Germany. It was unclear, however, whether West Germany’s ‘social market economy’ or East Germany’s ‘socialist planned economy’ would prove better in bringing about economic recovery and fulfilling promises of consumer utopia (Pence 221).

The SED struggled to match the Western standard of living and during the 1950s, the regime invested a large amount of money and resources into expanding the GDR’s own energy and steel industries with the intention of improving the shortage of raw materials. In order to do this, the SED created a new law to raise production levels by

10.3 percent, but this came at the expense of consumption and living standards which were already being compromised by the state (Ross 71). Workers were unable to meet these unrealistic demands and their frustration manifested itself into the workers' uprising on June 17, 1953. The uprising spread throughout East Germany and became a general and historical uprising calling for improved labour reform, consumption, and freedom. Social historian, Katherine Pence, writes, "The severe shortages plaguing consumers played a crucial role in shaping popular understandings of political transformations at this time" (219). She argues that the 1953 uprising is an example of the widespread discontent and political tensions that arose when people's consumer needs and desires were not being met. Only tanks from the Soviet Union and threats from the socialist government were able to expel the threat of the people's material discontent for the time being.

As a result of the 1953 uprising, the Soviet Union called for economic changes and the SED regime was forced to respond with the "New Course", a program it was hoped would improve the consumer culture in the GDR. Once again, the socialist government was required to recognize that providing the basic necessities for its people and building a consumer culture would be instrumental in establishing state legitimacy and maintaining power. By offering GDR citizens modern conveniences in their homes and other consumer products, the SED hoped to win their support. The idea was that if people saw their material surroundings improve, they would have nothing to complain about and therefore wouldn't criticize the SED leadership to the same degree.

In 1958, the SED publicly announced that the main economic task was to overtake West Germany in per capita consumption of all important foodstuffs and

consumer goods by the year 1961. The consequence was that consumption achieved an increasing importance again in the SED's social policy. However, the collectivization of agriculture and the failure of the Soviet Union to deliver goods and materials provoked an acute economic crisis. Major supply shortages appeared that affected the whole population, in particular: meat, butter, cheese, shoes, underwear and washing powder were scarce. The constant shortage of goods led to the fleeing of many East Germans to the West. The departure (*Republiksflucht* or flight from the Republic) of skilled employees to the West further aggravated material shortages because there was not enough labour to work in the East (Steiner 170-171).

Walter Ulbricht (the First Secretary of the SED from 1950 to 1971), eventually acknowledged the crisis and the consumer needs of the East Germans, especially as more and more East Germans escaped to the West and the gap between the two Germanys expanded. Between 1955 and 1957 nearly 250,000 East Germans left for the "golden West" (Kopstein 43). Private consumption was used by West German political leaders to portray the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) as more prosperous while its neighbour began its slow decay.

While trying to catch up with the consumer productivity of the FRG, Ulbricht and the SED effectively rejected it. Instead, it portrayed the consumerism of the West as "a product of the artificial creation of wants through advertising and consumer manipulation" (Hogwood, Citizens as Consumers 46). In 1961, Ulbricht wrote a letter to Khrushchev expressing his worry about the long-term economic and political consequences of not investing in the consumer goods sector. Ulbricht wrote:



...due to this, West Germany can constantly apply political pressure. The booming economy in West Germany, which is visible to every citizen in the GDR, is the main reason that over ten years about two million people have left our Republic. (qtd. in Kopstein 44)

With the support of the Soviet Union, the SED built the Berlin Wall in 1961 and although this may have helped to contain people, it did not contain their desires. East Germans constantly looked to the West for comparisons of material wealth, never to the East where their standard of living was considered high. The shortage of consumer goods and their poor quality re-emerged as constant features of life in the GDR.

In 1963, Walter Ulbricht revealed plans for a 'New Economic System' (NES), with the basic idea of increasing productivity and efficiency through greater flexibility, and providing profit sharing and bonuses as an incentive for greater performance. The reform had a positive effect in the first few years which led to an improvement in living standards, but this was short-lived. East German consumers began to experience severe shortages because of economic imbalances and design flaws associated with the introduction of the reforms, as well as conflicting political interests in Berlin and Moscow in how to pursue the NES reforms (Ross 71). There was an apparent discrepancy between the actual cost and the retail prices of food stuffs, textiles, industrial goods, and technical consumer goods. Industrial goods were either unavailable or too expensive to make up for the cheap prices of basic goods. As André Steiner writes, "In 1965, a television set cost 2,050 marks; a refrigerator, 1,359 marks; a washing machine, 1,350 marks; whereas the average gross monthly income was 633 marks" (176-177). The

outcome was that the NES was quietly dismantled and a more traditional, centrally administered system was reinstated in the late 1960s.

The GDR, under the Erich Honecker (General Secretary of the SED from 1971 to 1989) administration, made a conscious effort to improve the availability of consumer goods to East Germans. Their aim, similar to the previous administration, was to encourage increased productivity in return for more consumer goods with the motto: "Mehr produzieren, gerecht verteilen, besser leben" (Kaminsky 20). At the same time, it was realized in the 1970s that there was an obvious economic decline, although East Germany continued to have the highest living standards of all communist countries. The permanent orientation towards the affluent West proved to be powerful and disconcerting for socialist officials and a growing skepticism among East Germans towards their own system began to develop.

Already by 1980, it became clear that the strategy to satisfy Eastern consumers had entirely failed. The quality and quantity of consumer goods had started to decline. The world economic crises of 1973 and 1979 sent oil prices to unexpected heights, which then had to be compensated by increased exports. In addition, an ambitious housing program by Honecker and the importation of Western consumer goods resulted in severe debts. By 1978, further loans were required from West Germany to finance East Germany's already existing interest payments. Andreas Staab writes, "By 1980, fundamental mismanagement and lack of innovation and investment, as well as structural deficiencies, deteriorated and brought the GDR to the verge of bankruptcy" (25). In 1982, the GDR lost its credibility and international banks refused to give any further loans. East Germany was only saved from financial ruin by substantial loans from the

Federal Republic of one billion *Deutschmark* in each of the years, 1983 and 1984. The GDR authorities were forced to rely on a policy of autarky that led to severe economic and ecological problems.

In the crisis of 1989, at one of the final meetings of Honecker's Politburo, Gerhard Schürer observed that there were poorer countries in the East who offered more goods in their stores than the GDR even though East Germany was comparably wealthier. Even more frustrating, notes Schürer, is that East Germans who had money couldn't spend it because there weren't enough goods in the GDR to purchase. Unable to vote or chose their own leaders, East Germans had understood their rights largely in economic and terms of consumption. Jeffrey Kopstein adds, "For years, the SED had desperately fought Western conceptions of political rights with an image of a package of economic rights, present only in a socialist society" (192). The failure of the socialist state, however, to provide economic rights through the quality, quantity, and variety of consumer goods comparable to the West helped to speed up the revolution of 1989 and was one of the reasons that led to the collapse of the GDR.

### **2.3 East German Stores and Goods**

What did the SED provide to its citizens? The socialist state of the GDR was able to provide domestically produced products which were typically cheap, unadvertised, of low quality, and were supposed to be readily available. However, most of the time they were out of stock because of production and distribution problems. At the beginning of the 1950s, East Germans purchased half of the items they needed for daily use at privately owned stores, one-third at *HO* (*Handelsorganisation* or state stores), and one-

fifth at *Konsum* cooperatives. The *HO* stores were originally opened up by SED leadership to compete with the black market; they offered goods unavailable elsewhere and the party promised that once conditions normalized, prices would drop to become more affordable (Landsman 222-223).

*Exquisit* stores, which offered premium merchandise, were opened in 1961 and *Delikat-Läden* were opened in 1966. Consumers could buy luxury items at these stores like truffles, Dutch coffee, American cigarettes, foreign wines, olives, curry, ketchup, and orange juice. Therefore, those East Germans who could afford these products were already introduced to the consumer products of the capitalist West (Merkel, Utopie und Bedürfnis 271). Unfortunately, at the same time that *Exquisit* stores increased the variety of goods available to East Germans, the quality of certain products at the *HO* or *Konsum* stores was intentionally reduced (for example, the water content was increased in some processed meats). Consequently, the state indirectly forced consumers into stores where products were sold at a higher price. The East German state then benefited from a covert form of inflation, thereby allowing the government to increase the amount of money in circulation. However, GDR citizens who worked in low-paying occupations, or who were senior citizens, or students were not able to afford the higher prices in the *Exquisit* stores, and as a result their standard of living dropped (Merkel, Utopie und Bedürfnis 263-272; Ten Dyke 260).

The state not only restricted where GDR citizens bought their consumer goods, but also defined consumers' tastes. In the beginning of the 1950s, the SED attempted to have a different relationship towards their material surroundings from that of the bourgeois society of the West. Instead of the romantic frills and ancient motives that

were popular in West Germany at the time, the state tried to neutralize the importance of material goods through the practice of educating people's tastes to be more rational, practical, and economical. This was a struggle by the SED against material styles of the past and ornamental designs that might draw consumers towards superficiality (Veenis 90-92).

The GDR functionalist design developed from the late 1950s and on as a method for creating rational consumer objects as well as rational consumers. From the state's perspective, these principles of functionality and purposefulness turned out to be quite practical as well. That is, the principles were economic and cheap, because a straight rectangular table was easier, cheaper and faster to produce than a table with rounded edges and ornamental carvings. The words: *Wachsamkeit* (vigilance), *Sparsamkeit* (thriftiness), *das Wesentliche* (the essential), and *Sachlichkeit* (succinctness) were encouraged in advertisements, newspapers, and magazines as good East German values to follow (Kaminsky 30).

However, it wasn't before long that the state began to fear that its policy of functionalism made socialist products look ascetic and cheap. Already by the 1960s, attempts for improvements were made and more colour and variety were added to the socialist design of consumer products. After Honecker attained power in the 1970s, it was openly admitted that all objects designed in a consistently functional way looked ascetic, frugal, and cheap. There was a slow turnaround to embrace Western bourgeois aesthetic values instead of the cheap functionality of the socialist GDR (Merkel, Consumer Culture 290). However, by the 1980s and 1990s, it was observed that still a lot had not changed, and most everyday East German products stayed relatively the same

from the 1960s and on. It was this lack of innovation and consumer choice that was extremely frustrating to East Germans, but that would later become a sense of comforting nostalgia and collective memory after 1989.

#### **2.4 Availability of Raw Products**

No matter how much education there was about the beauty of functionality, there was a deficiency in its availability. Products were scarce in East Germany because of the ineffective state-structured factories that were made to produce consumer products. Moreover, the GDR economy suffered from an inefficient use of resources that was exacerbated by the lack of materials, owing to the embargo against the communist bloc. In particular, the GDR lacked cotton, wool, rubber, aluminum, steel, electrical insulation, and more importantly, natural wood (Rubin, Order of Substitutes 159).

The regime tried to solve this lack of natural resources through imitation and the development of alternatives. For example, since lumber was scarce, most furniture was made from a mixture of saw-dust and glue which was then covered with plastic foil and had a motif of wood on it (Veenis 92). The GDR tried to make clothes with spun rayon in place of cotton and wool. However, East German factories spun yarn of extremely poor quality and difficulties occurred with the chemical preparations that frequently stopped production altogether. Eventually, they would forgo the spun rayon and import cotton and wool from the Soviet Union and other Soviet bloc countries. This was an extremely expensive practice, and there was never a continuous supply of quality cotton and wool (Stitzel 28).

What distinguished East from West Germany was the tendency by the SED to increase investment at the expense of consumption which did not allow East Germany to develop into a functioning consumer society like West Germany (Steiner 168). For example, the regime made a massive investment into synthetics through the creation of the *Chemieprogramm* (Chemistry Program). Begun in 1958, the Chemistry Program tried to synthesize what it could not find naturally. For example, the SED government introduced colourful plastics, which were celebrated as a vital element in modernizing and improving the aesthetics of everyday life in the GDR. Because plastic could be chemically derived, it promised to help alleviate the problem of raw material shortages. Plastics were used for household products, polyester clothes, and as a laminate for most of the floors in new apartments, including the infamous P2 apartments (Kaminsky 62-64; Rubin, Form of Socialism 159). P2 was the nickname for the apartments made up of prefabricated concrete slabs (*Plattenbau*) during the 1960s and on. These standardized apartment buildings were the cornerstone of the SED's industrial housing policy until the year 1989, and incorporated many of the socialist experiments of functionality and new plastic products (Ludwig 7-8).

The first specialized store for plastics opened in 1959 on *Stalinallee* in Berlin with the program name "Chemie im Heim" (Chemistry in the Home). It was thought to be a showpiece for the regime and their *Chemieprogramm* by offering almost every conceivable product possible for the home: buckets, dishes, eating utensils, cutting boards, clothing, medicine cabinets, toilet seats, lamp stands, laundry baskets, and camping gear (Rubin, Plastics and Dictatorship 96).

At first, consumers embraced plastics because they considered the plastic products to be chic, modern, practical, and valuable. The creation of plastics was intended to be the way of the future for East Germans and slogans such as "Chemistry gives beauty, affluence, and bread" were well advertised throughout the East. The excitement over the technology of plastics meant that no one was allowed to complain. If they did, historian Eli Rubin writes, they were considered to be old-fashioned and technologically unsophisticated (Plastics and Dictatorship 87-91). Periodicals such as a woman's home decorating magazine, *Kultur im Heim* and youth magazines such as *Jugend und Technik* praised the benefits of plastics for Eastern consumers and strived to explain the superiority of Eastern plastic goods over Western material goods. Despite the praise that the *Chemieprogramm* received, SED officials were concerned that plastics might be seen by consumers as cheap substitutes for the 'real' material: wood, rubber, or aluminum.

Moreover, the Chemistry Program encountered a number of other difficulties. One such difficulty was that the GDR was never able to acquire enough oil from the Soviet Union, or the Arab States to create plastics, and they were unable to afford the technology from the United Kingdom to produce plastic goods because they did not have enough Western currency. There was also internal confusion as to which body and institution was to manage the production of plastic consumer goods. Additionally, consumer choice suffered from the introduction of plastics because suddenly certain products could only be found in plastic, or not at all. For example, after the *Chemieprogramm*, highchairs, toilet seats, and some camping gear could only be found in



plastic. Eventually, it became clear to the SED leadership that they may have been overly optimistic about the advantages of plastics.

The Chemistry Program may have failed to solve the shortage of material goods in the GDR through plastic, but shortly after 1989, these plastics were rediscovered and were considered a trendy symbol and memory of East Germany's failed attempt to be innovative. After 1989, East German plastic products like napkin holders, or egg cups were being sold at flea markets and on websites for more than double their original price. A nostalgia was created surrounding plastics because the creation of them had been such a defining moment in the history of the GDR. Plastics were supposed to pave the way for the future of the GDR, but the project failed because it was not able to solve the scarcity of consumer goods (Rubin, Order of Substitutes 113-114).

## **2.5 Packaging and Advertising in the GDR**

The packaging of material goods was a similarly challenging and frustrating experience for East Germans. Packaging was a relatively new and capitalist phenomenon which emerged with the mass production of goods. The problem with packaging in East Germany was that there were constant shortages of raw materials and therefore shortages in packing material, so that consumers often had to find their own solutions to packaging. The other problem was that the equipment required to produce and package goods could only be bought from Western countries with hard currency, which was scarce in the GDR. This was particularly aggravating to consumers who wanted modern, attractive, and glamorous packaging similar to the West (Merkel, Utopie und Bedürfnis 101-102).

Unlike its neighbours to the West however, there was no need to advertise products in the GDR because the limited quantity meant that goods sold themselves. Every article was presented in a plain matter-of-fact style and offered at a fixed price and quality. Therefore, East German goods did not have the quality or competitive edge that Western goods had. The design and language used in marketing products was dull and lacked any appeal to consumers. Colours used on packaging were faded, often because of the poor-quality inks and dyes that were used and packaging was limited to a few varieties of paper, cardboard, and plastics. This was according to the logic of the socialist economy that did not encourage concepts of advertising, marketing, competition, or consumerism. If a product was advertised, it was interpreted as a signal that something might be wrong with the product, for why else would producers need to advertise in an economy with a shortage of goods (Feick and Gierl 228)?

Most of the products that were introduced during the consumer rush of the 1960s stayed in production until 1989 with little change in content or form. Packaging and advertising were made to reflect socialist ideals. The aesthetic of 'sameness' in packaging and advertising was crucial in shaping the GDR's collective memory of material goods. The very lack of product innovation and repackaging ensured that they would be remembered by generations afterwards as markers of East German material culture.

Because of the poor quality of advertising, packaging, and content in East Germany, consumers had to get to know their products first before being able to accept and have confidence in them. Consumers needed to know how to handle the products that they bought, as well as care for them. Unlike their Western relatives who could

usually rely on the products that they bought, East Germans had to develop intimate knowledge of their products (Blum 235, 241). The absence of brand identification and packaging allowed Eastern consumers to create personal stories of the products based on their own consumer experience.

## **2.6 The Difficulty of Shopping in the GDR**

The accumulation of material goods was a defining characteristic that divided East and West Germany, but on the Eastern side it was a much more involved process. Due to the continuous scarcity and central regulation of consumer goods, people were forced to spend an enormous amount of time, patience, and creativity in obtaining the basic necessities. One positive aspect of this was that in East Germany, consumption was a far more social and cultural activity than it was in West Germany. Cultural historian, Veenis writes, "Most (East) Germans were part of social networks in which material exchange, transactions and rumours played an important role" (93). Neighbours and friends helped each other with acquiring scarce goods, stood in long queues for hours together, and were always on the lookout for anything that might be on sale.

The role of women was especially important for consumerism. They were expected to contribute to the economic recovery of East Germany both by working and consuming. Women were required, writes historian David F. Crew, "to consume 'responsibly,' to adopt 'social consumption habits,' and to teach them to their husbands and children" (9). The added burden of being a consumer in addition to the responsibility of taking care of their families and households even though they worked was extremely frustrating for women. Improvements had been made in household equipment, including

the increasing availability of vacuum cleaners and washing machines, so that women could spend the extra time they needed on shopping (Köstlin 20; Luthar 238-239).

However, the long queues were an inescapable feature of the consumer society in the GDR that consisted mainly of women and as historian Ten Dyke observes, the long lines had the effect of regularly reinforcing the subordinate position of the consumer in the East German economy (266).

To deal with the chronic shortages suffered in the GDR, women resorted to a variety of tactics including writing long letters of complaint to the authorities, finding ways to jump ahead in queue, and coming up with creative alternatives in their shopping and consumption habits. Networks of communication among neighbours and colleagues were especially important when a shopkeeper received a delivery of goods considered rare in the GDR. East Germans cultivated and maintained personal relationships with shopkeepers, mechanics, and other business people in order to acquire necessary or desirable consumer goods. Historian Ten Dyke gives an example of the marketplace:

An obdurate shopkeeper could slam the register shut in the face of a consumer, if it was time for coffee. She could flatly deny that any blenders, TVs or bed linens were available for sale, even if the customer happened to know personally that a shipment had just been delivered. (266)

East Germans were aware that they could never be certain whether the items they wanted would be available when they needed them. Therefore, if a shipment came in with something that might be needed in the future, people would stock up. For example, even if a person didn't need new tires for their *Trabant* that month, they would buy the tires for the following year when they might need them. Moreover, if they didn't need to

use the tires, the tires could be used to trade for a service, or another consumer good. Historian, Ina Merkel recounts the experience of knowing someone who stored three complete Trabant exhaust systems in his cellar. The reason was that in a previous experience the acquaintance had been forced to wait weeks to finally have his exhaust system on his car repaired (Consumer Culture 293). Likewise, in an interview with Dirk Philipsen, Doris C. relates, "Everybody always bought everything he could get his hands on, whether he needed it or not, and then we exchanged things among ourselves. We had a lively barter economy going" (qtd. in Philipsen 127).

The availability of goods was unreliable. For example, bottled beverages would be plentiful in the winter, but scarce in the summer when demand was high and people wanted to particularly quench their thirst. Or goods would be available, but only in unsuitable proportions, for example, there would be excessive quantities of shoes, but only in one particular size. In addition, goods produced in East Germany, textiles, for example, never made it on the shelves because they were intended solely for export.

There were also seasonal rhythms of consumption, including shopping during vacations abroad. East Germans would travel to other Eastern Bloc countries to obtain the products they could not find in the GDR, for example, clothing, shoes, and food. In Hungary, they would buy the Soviet magazine *Sputnik* which was banned in East Germany in 1988, or shoes in Prague, which were often better quality than the shoes in the GDR. There was also the problem with regional inequalities that disrupted shopping opportunities. Berlin and Leipzig were popular shopping centers because they were places where thousands of foreigners, traveling with hard (convertible) currency would pass through (Ten Dyke 262).

Many goods were in high demand, but produced in limited quantities, for example, vacuum cleaners, sewing machines, apartments, and cars. To obtain these products, East Germans would submit applications to the appropriate office of government in order to be put on an extensive waiting list before being called up to pick up their requested item (Philipsen 123-124). It could take three years to get a sewing machine, four to get an apartment, and ten to twenty to get a car. The demand for individual transportation remained consistently high in East Germany and therefore waiting lists for cars such as the *Trabant* and *Wartburg* were extensive. Andreas Staab writes that, "The annual production of *Trabants* and *Wartburgs* increased steadily, from 64,000 in 1960 to 218,000 in 1988" (105). These cars were regarded as the most precious possession in East Germany. This is demonstrated by the fact that in 1984, East Germans spent twenty-eight percent of their total expenditure on items associated with the automobile. In summary, shopping was an incredibly arduous task for many East Germans because of lack of goods, high prices on 'luxury' goods, having to stand in long queues, and the regional inequalities.

## **2.7 Western Consumerism available to East Germans**

The frustration of shopping was exacerbated by the constant comparison to the West. Despite the construction of the Berlin Wall, the border was still permeable. East Germans had greater access than any of the other countries in the Eastern Bloc to Western consumerism through advertisements on television and communication with relatives in the West. Before 1961, when the Berlin Wall was built, East Germans were

able to travel to the West and make comparisons of wealth by looking into department stores.

After the Berlin Wall was built, East Germans were able to access West German television signals and make comparisons of wealth between East and West—though until the mid 1970s, the government forbade watching Western television. Nevertheless, since Western television also showed some of the negative aspects of capitalist society, including drugs and crime, the government finally gave up the futile practice of sending out young FDJ (*Freie Deutsche Jugend* or “Free German Youth”) members to turn people’s aeriols to face the East. Dresden was the exception; it was unable to receive TV signals from the West and was described as the *Tal der Ahnungslosen* (“valley of the clueless”) (Crew 3; McKay 23-24).

Aside from Western media, East Germans were able to consume Western products through their West German relatives and friends. West Germans could either create a package (*Westpakate* or Western package) of coffee, chocolate, cash, and clothing or deliver it themselves when they visited the East. The hard currency could then be used to buy Western products from the *Intershops*.

Originally however, East Germans were forbidden from shopping in the *Intershops* and only tourists, diplomats, and other foreigners living in or visiting the GDR could buy goods from the *Intershops*. These shops were created to entice Westerners to spend their hard currency in East Germany when they visited. In 1973, it was made legal for East German citizens to possess Western currency and they were able to spend their money in the shops. However, most consumers were prevented from purchasing these

'luxury' Western goods because of high prices, limited access to hard currency, and small quantities (Feick and Gierl 228; Köstlin 25).

Furthermore, being able to buy Western goods came at a price. By overpricing the costs of luxurious items, the SED leadership could make everyday consumer goods including adequate housing, foodstuffs, and everyday necessities more affordable (Crew 5; Steiner 169). For example, a VCR could cost as much as 6,000 Marks, or almost 100 times the amount of one month's rent in the GDR (Ten Dyke 260). The price tag for VCRs was high for another reason, that is, it was an attempt to control the distribution of video material, especially taping Western television. Therefore, the prices of a large number of products and services no longer reflected their production cost, which is what the SED had intended in order to keep the price of basic necessities down. By overpricing the costs of luxurious items, the SED leadership could make everyday consumer goods including adequate housing, foodstuffs, and everyday necessities more affordable (Crew 5; Steiner 169). Hence, the East German leadership did not deprive their citizens of luxurious goods, but they made it very difficult to obtain them.

The few Western things that people were able to obtain, either through *Westpakate* or the *Intershops* were so rare and treated with extremely good care, that often articles would go unused because they were never considered a normal article of use. A cookie jar, tablecloth, or pen from West Germany could never be seen as a normal cookie jar, tablecloth, or pen. The prominent East German psychiatrist Hans-Joachim Maaz made the observation that West German material objects sometimes incurred a fetish value for East Germans, who would collect empty Western beer or cola cans and place them in a cabinet in the living room as special ornaments from the West (86).



Additionally, plastic bags with Western advertisement would be used to barter for other goods and Western jeans were coveted. Even the high officials in the SED party participated in this material impulse by hoarding Western imports (eg. cars, television sets, and phonographs) as signs of status and power. *Politbüro* members and their families had unlimited access to Western goods in their secluded compound of Wandlitz, north of Berlin and preferred to be driven around in their chauffeured Volvos rather than in the East German car, the *Trabant*.

However, not everyone had access to West German television, or Western goods, or even the desire or need for such products. Some East Germans did not have relatives in the West, or did not maintain contact with them, especially if they worked for the *Stasi* (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* or the "Ministry for State Security"), the police, or the military where contact with Westerners was suspect and absolutely forbidden. This arrangement disadvantaged the middle- to lower-level officials who were forbidden contact with the West, but it also contradicted the official policy in favouring those who had cultivated contacts in the West.

As a result of the access to Western media and relatives, East Germans were knowledgeable with regards to the trends and products of West Germany and the United States, but this also created frustration. The surplus of luxury items in the West was in stark contrast to the shortages and inferior merchandise experienced by East Germans and was a source of continual comparison and disappointment. This was the emotional background to the never-ending and never-satisfying experience of consumption for East Germans.

Throughout the existence of the GDR, the Socialist Unity Party struggled with providing enough consumer goods to its citizens without compromising its socialist ideology on consumption. Although the SED criticized the consumption of the West as being driven by false advertising and consumer manipulation, it struggled to match the Western standard of living. However, the SED was not able to satisfy Eastern consumers because of the quality and quantity of goods that were and were not available, as well as the state's economic policies which were not determined by an internal market. Although the SED was not able to realize its promises of material wealth, consumerism turned out to be one of the most important themes that guided East Germans in their daily lives and according to historians such as Daphne Berdahl and Judd Stitzel, consumerism would be one of the reasons for East Germany's final demise (Berdahl 235; Stitzel 23).

### **Chapter Three: THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL AND *OSTALGIE***

#### **3.1 East Germans Shopping in the West**

Years of dissatisfaction and frustration with consumerism among other disappointments in East Germany deprived the GDR of its political legitimacy to survive as a separate and independent state. It has been debated that the fall of the Berlin Wall was more about the failure of the state to provide adequate consumer rights for East Germans than about political or human rights. Daphne Berdahl argues, "For many western Germans, as well as for much of the world, the "triumph" of capitalism and democracy seemed to be reflected and confirmed in the "consuming frenzy" (*Konsumrausch*) of the "Ossis" (East Germans) (The Spirit of Capitalism 235). This was illustrated by one of the first acts of hundreds of thousands of East Germans who crossed

into West Germany. They lined up at any bank in West Germany and claimed their 100 DM in *Begrüßungsgeld* (welcome money) to which they were entitled when they entered the West for their first time. Then they strolled through the streets and spent their money on bananas, stereos, jeans, and other items that had previously not been available or affordable in East Germany (Paul 46; Staab 100). The materialistic promises that had been made to East Germans about a 'Golden Future' appeared to be realized and fulfilled in the West. Whether the fall of the Berlin Wall can be solely attributed to the desire of East Germans to consume (as Berdahl and Stitzel suggest) is rather a simplistic understanding of the *Wende* and fails to acknowledge the complexity and multiplicity of reasons for the demise of the GDR.<sup>7</sup> In any case, the desire and opportunity to consume after the fall of the Berlin Wall was evident. In an interview with Dirk Philipsen, Bernd K recounts his amazement with Western material culture after 1989. He tells Dirk Philipsen:

Of course we watched Western TV, saw Western advertisements, and such, but the reality of it all just blew me away. When I went to a home appliance store in the West for the first time, I walked through the aisles and just mumbled to myself, like a senile old man, "This can't be true, this is unbelievable, I must be dreaming." They had all the things I had been trying to get at home for years, and not just in one kind, but in hundreds of variations. (qtd. in Philipsen 124)

As Bernd K. observed, the excitement and chaos of the following weeks disrupted many consumer habits that had developed in the GDR. East Germans no longer needed to travel to Berlin to buy a toaster or to Prague to buy a pair of well-made shoes or wait in long queues to purchase an item. Everything they desired, it seemed was accessible in

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<sup>7</sup> Other reasons for the collapse of the GDR can be found in chapter five of Corey Ross's book.

West Germany and soon made available in East German shops too. Moreover, after the currency union in 1990, East Germans could withdraw *Deutschmark* from their bank account with the majority of their savings being converted at the rate of 2:1 (Ten Dyke 270). With DM in their bank account, East Germans who had been waiting for ten years to buy a car could now enter a car showroom, if they had enough savings, and acquire the car of their choice without having to wait for years. The same experience applied to obtaining washing machines, television sets, furniture, vacuum cleaners, and other luxury household items that had been either unaffordable, or unattainable in the GDR because of long waiting times (Dennis and Kolinsky 4-5). In an effort to catch up with the West, the East German consumer spent their hard-earned savings on these luxurious products.

Immediately after the *Wende*, East Germans first exercised their freedom of choice by spending exorbitant amounts of money on food and drink. In her article, 'Red is for Love. . .': Citizens as Consumers in East Germany', Patricia Hogwood uses data from the "Statistisches Bundesamt" to show the breakdown of personal consumption expenditures in East Germany between 1991 and 1997. She observes that those with a low income spent 30.5 percent of their net income in 1991 on food, drink and tobacco and those households with high earnings spent 24.6 percent of their income on such products in 1991. She reasons that East Germans continued the same consumer behaviour of buying and hoarding as many food items as possible because of the unreliability of supplies they had experienced in the former GDR. In addition, East Germans might have been curious to try new and unfamiliar foods and fruits. Later, East Germans began to invest in household goods. Initially, they spent a lot of money on essential repairs, but in 1997, in an effort to catch up with the West; low-income

households in the East spent 10.1 percent of their income on furniture and household goods, while their Western peers spent 5.3 percent (Hogwood, Citizens as Consumers 51).

Ironically, shopping took just as much time after the changes of 1989-90 as it had before the fall of the Wall. It was still a time-consuming process, but for entirely different reasons. Before 1989, shopping was difficult because of the inadequate supply of goods, but after 1990, the availability of goods was overwhelming and shopping became a complex and difficult task of decision making. For example, East Germans were confronted with more jams and fruits than they could name, in a variety of sizes, and with labels from foreign countries. Product prices ranged so widely, it was difficult to know, at first, what was a good purchase (Ten Dyke 273). In any case, Easterners gradually had their first unpleasant experiences with the Western consumer society and, in an interesting twist of events began to embrace their own consumer culture.

### **3.2 Difficulties with the Fall of the Berlin Wall**

One of the more profound issues surrounding the *Wende* was the radically changed status of material objects in the GDR. As East Germans began to buy West German products, the result was that more and more Eastern products vanished from the shelves of supermarkets, and many East German shopkeepers were forced to sell their remaining stock at surprisingly low levels. If the products did not sell, it was their fate to end up in the landfill, the flea market or eventually the museum. Furthermore, the currency union between East and West Germany meant that the Soviet Union and other

Eastern European states could no longer afford to purchase products from the GDR because they were too expensive.

Another problem with the arrival of Western consumerism was that East German consumers put their fellow citizens out of work because shop owners could no longer sell their products to Eastern consumers. Items that were in heavy demand just months before the *Wende*, including the *Trabant* and *Wartburg* cars were eventually robbed of their comparative value and were transformed into obsolete artifacts. They and other East German products were stigmatized as being representative of an inefficient, outdated, and unattractive economy of shortages.

Gaining appreciation for their defunct country was difficult at first for East Germans. The disclosure of Stasi documents and actions revealed how corrupt the GDR state really was and this represented a betrayal to its citizens. People no longer trusted each other once the Stasi archives were opened and had the terrible realization that they had been watched by their own family and friends. In addition, the discovery that some of their most respected intellectuals and writers, including Christa Wolf, Sascha Anderson, Rainer Schedlinski and Heiner Müller had acted as *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (unofficial collaborators) for the Stasi, led many to lose confidence in the East German people and the state they had once lived in.

Not only did intellectuals lose the respect of East Germans through their involvement with the Stasi, but Paul Betts argues that the intellectuals were unsuccessful in contributing to the understanding of the GDR and establishing support from the people. This, Betts says, also aided in spurring pop culture nostalgia. He writes, "It was the collapse of ideals coupled with the intellectuals' failure to provide any alternative

language of noncapitalist social solidarity that helped convert material culture into a new locus of historical romanticism” (746). In other words, mass consumer products replaced discussion of culture including state architecture, paintings, and literature and instead a certain sense of nostalgia appeared for East German goods. The loss of faith in state and its people blocked any real positive identification with the GDR past and this was another reason why, according to Betts, material culture emerged as a way of finding something positive in the GDR past. This assessment by Betts, that culture was replaced by material culture requires further investigation. First, why did East German intellectuals not provide an alternative narrative of collective memory through culture, and for what reasons were they not able to do so? Was the cultural expression of these East German intellectuals in the form of architecture, paintings and literature suppressed and therefore they were unable to provide an alternative way of understanding East German history?

### **3.3 Reasons for *Ostalgie***

When the immediate impact of unification resulted in mass unemployment, social disintegration, and disappointment, Easterners felt betrayed by the West and the federal government. They began to yearn for certain aspects of the GDR, including the social welfare system, child care, employment for all, subsidized housing, and basic necessities. This nostalgia for the GDR past has been given the term *Ostalgie*. *Ostalgie* is a word that is often used to define the nostalgic feelings that East Germans have towards the GDR. The term was first coined in the late 1990s in the television and consumer culture, and is a combination of the German words for “nostalgia” (*Nostalgie*) and “East” (*Ost*). Soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many East Germans experienced nostalgia (from

*nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing), a longing for a home that no longer existed (Boym xiii). Although nostalgia is a longing for the past, its memories are often determined by the needs of the present. In this way, nostalgia for the GDR was a response to the fundamental political, economic, and social changes that confronted East Germans with unification (Boym xvi, Pinkert 228). The term *Ostalgie* and its association with nostalgia denote a sense of profound loss and the attempt to come to terms with it.

Martin Blum quotes Hans-Günter Eschke who writes:

Nostalgia describes an entire mind-set . . . Here the glorification of the past—the conditions of which have been lost or destroyed—becomes the dominant impulse.

In a rather undifferentiated fashion, the mourning for this loss is thus elevated to a largely positive view of the entire nature (of this past) as well as its individual's properties, and consequently dominates the entire view of society and the individual's place in it. (qtd. in Blum, Remaking the East German past 230)

East German nostalgia is linked to the fact that the GDR literally vanished overnight. This speedy absorption—often called “Kohl-onization” (named after Chancellor Helmut Kohl who promised ‘blossoming landscapes’ when the Wall fell) by East Germans is what makes the GDR story so unique. Unification in 1990 was done quickly and peacefully, but it did not result in diplomatic sovereignty and political independence (Betts 734). Suddenly, an entire state, along with its institutions, cultural values, and political beliefs was dissolved and GDR citizens were faced with the task of trying to locate themselves in an unfamiliar society, with its own rules, values, and identity (Blum 230). Uta Leupolt, a student of education writes:



Everything is already just as it is in the West. From the whole welfare system, only the "People's Solidarity" (*Volkssolidarität*) is from here, the rest is from the West. It is really unfortunate that so little of the Eastern biography is included.

(15)

Unexpectedly, their Eastern institutions, clubs (Pioneer and FDJ), and holiday celebrations disappeared into the capitalist West. Jana Hensel recalls that as a small child she noticed the changes at school, for example, children no longer received milk at school, they no longer trained in competitive sports after school, and they no longer had to attend school on Saturdays. Instead, families had time to watch Western TV shows and drive to the West with their children in order to pick up their 'welcome money'. Overnight, it appeared to Jana Hensel that everything from her childhood had disappeared and found its way into a museum (15-18, 25).

Unification also meant that the principles of state support had to be phased out. Previously, the cost of housing, energy, essential foodstuffs, and child rearing had been heavily subsidized in the GDR. Now, East Germans were faced with new costs and unfamiliar demands on household budgets. Additionally, many were experiencing loss of employment, something they had never known before. This meant not only a loss of financial security, but it also meant a loss of community with their co-workers, and a sense of purpose. The factories where they had once worked were an important social unit and a place of belonging. It was in the workplace where GDR residents not only worked, but also socialized, and factory brigades regularly provided the only opportunity to travel away from home. Some factories housed a daycare center, a doctor's office, and a general store on their grounds. This helped to make the household tasks easier and was

an attempt by the state to replace certain roles and functions—child rearing and family meals—that were usually the sphere of the family to the responsibility of the state.

### **3.4 Development of Collective Memory and *Ostalgie***

Once the GDR and its institutions no longer existed as the basis and measure of East German collective identity and culture, GDR artifacts were resurrected as the last remains of a shared past. In an interesting twist, it is the consumer object that the socialist state feared all along, that has been revived into a collective memory by GDR citizens after 1989. Collective memory, explains Aleida Assmann, depends on a common point of orientation, and in the East German case this was material culture. The lack of material goods was a common feature that many East Germans could relate to, and as a group they reconstructed their collective memory of the GDR in terms of missing material objects (30ff). In the years since the state's demise, the focus of popular examinations of the GDR was primarily on the role of the Stasi. This has had the result of alienating many ordinary East Germans, who felt that the actual experience of their everyday life in the East has been devalued and ignored (Cooke, Performing 'Ostalgie' 160). Collective memory in the form of *Ostalgie* is an attempt to salvage some collective dignity from unification and to formulate a collective identity of being a separate community from the West (Hogwood, After the GDR 59).

Assmann further divides collective memory into two: communicative memory, and cultural memory. Communicative memory is considered to be the short-term memory of a society, whereby individuals communicate their memories to the next generation. These individual memories disappear within 80-100 years (36-38). Cultural

memory, on the other hand, is the formation and storage of long-term memory that is carried well beyond the generation of those that experienced an event, like the fall of the Berlin Wall. Cultural memory perpetuates the collective memory of the past, which cannot be transmitted over time in communicative memory. It does this by using images, sculptures, monuments, festivals, symbols, architecture, institutions and objects of material culture to remind generations of the past (Assmann 49-50). The interaction of the different types of memory: collective, communicative, and cultural is important for the historical consciousness of individuals, groups, and societies.

In understanding these collective memories, whether they are nostalgic or not, material culture of the past is organized with reference to the present. Breda Luthar writes, "Remembering is always a reconstruction and representation of the past and not a recording of the past, and has more to do with invention, the present, the imagined and representation than with what actually happened" (Luthar 231). East Germans have concentrated their memory in material culture because of a renewed appreciation for socialist values resulting from an ongoing frustration with unification.

The embarrassment that East Germans initially felt towards their material products changed rapidly to feelings of pride and nostalgia. One of the reasons for this is that those previously disdained articles suddenly became material reminders of their vanished life in the GDR. It was not until after unification that many East Germans began to appreciate the distinctive element of the socialist regime of consumption; namely the welfare system that provided cheap, subsidized public transport, housing, and basic foodstuffs. In an interview with Dirk Philippsen, Doris C. laments about the benefits of socialism. She says:

We all had work; in fact, we did not know any unemployment. Families with a lot of children were supported. We had a comprehensive child care and kindergarten system. We had a decent educational system for everybody. All of this was very well-established, nobody had to live in poverty or great need, everybody enjoyed a sense of security, had enough to eat, a place to live, and clothes to wear. (qtd. in Philipsen 127)

As a result of this recognition of the socialist system, East Germans began to associate particular Eastern products with a romanticized past which appeared to be more stable, secure, relaxed, and friendly than the new confused turbulent times of the 1990s. They began to associate Eastern goods with highly positive characteristics, such as value for money, honesty, and trust, in defiance of the misleading products of the West.

These objects from the GDR reminded East Germans of a time when materialism did not assume as much importance. This is explained to Milena Veenis during her 15 month stay (between 1993 and 1994) in Rudolstadt, a village in Thüringen. She writes that her conversations with the locals in a little pub called the "Tuchmacherhaus" revealed to her that even though there was almost nothing available for purchase in the GDR and the few Western things that people had were cherished, in a way, those days were better. No one, it was thought, possessed more than anyone else and there wasn't the same competition over who owned more as there was after 1989 (Veenis 81-82). Those interviewed by Veenis at the "Tuchmacherhaus" also commented that relations between people were warmer and more genuine previous to the *Wende* (Veenis 81, 96). However, as noted in chapter two, consumption and the pursuit of material accumulation was an on-going concern for both the state and its consumers before 1989. The

distinction that needs to be made is that after 1989 new problems emerged with consumption.

One such problem included that even though Western products became available, it didn't make them affordable. Indeed, the positive identification with GDR goods was a response to post-1989 consumer frustration. On the one hand, East Germans were finally able to obtain the long-sought-after Western products, but they were not affordable. Unemployment and high prices for even basic necessities exacerbated consumer frustration. The loss of jobs enhanced the division between East and West and heightened the old East German self-perception of being second-class citizens. All those once coveted Western objects had lost their value once they became readily available after the *Wende*.

The growing collective consciousness towards the GDR material artifacts was shown to be a coping mechanism to the problems and conflicts that were created by unification. The questioning and celebration of GDR nostalgia was required for East Germans to construct their own memory of themselves. For some, *Ostalgie* proved that not everything in their lives under communism was bad and inferior – a conclusion that many East and West Germans drew right after unification (Theil 18). At the same time, it was clear that any sense of nostalgia that East Germans might have had did not mean that they wanted the SED regime back; rather, they wanted to be recognized, to be able to contribute, and to have their history recognized (Grix 5).

Disappointed Easterners took refuge in a GDR nostalgia that revived some of their products and encouraged a sort of self-esteem (Jarausch 12). Many continued to bond over certain standardized and mass produced commodities from the former GDR.

Catchwords were sufficient enough to elicit mutual recognition and lively discussions about specific brands to re-establish an East German identity. For example, the phrase "Remember the Multimax?" (a power drill in the GDR) could start an intense conversation about the past (Merkel, Consumer Culture 296). This nostalgia for material culture from the GDR also revealed the special connection of East German memory with the construction of the West itself. Betts writes:

Certainly it can be argued that such sentimentalism has enjoyed little corresponding expression in other East Bloc countries precisely because the GDR (both before and after 1989) was more enamored of Western consumer dreams than its socialist brethren were. (761)

A wave of nostalgia was recognized after 1989 in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc including Poland, Hungary, former Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia and similar to East Germany, this nostalgia was not connected with the desire to return to the past (Crowley 9). There was interest in music, art, popular culture, products of the home, and food, as there was in East Germany. In Yugoslavia it was even given the name *Yugonostalgia*, which refers to nostalgia for anything positive from the past that is worth preserving. Many regard this as a means of healing from the past. However, according to Dubravka Ugrešić, material culture in Yugoslavia, Poland, and Hungary are not being remembered in depth through museums, archives, or in history textbooks as it is in East Germany. Rather the memory of material culture is slowly being forgotten in these former countries of the Eastern Bloc (37-39).

Shortly after the Berlin Wall fell, many East Germans participated in collectively remembering the German Democratic Republic in a number of different ways. Women

resumed buying the East German washing detergent *Spee*, teenagers sought out the East German *Vita Cola* or *Club Cola*, and families insisted on driving their *Trabi*. By the mid 1990s this struggle with the West had become widespread, and remembering these objects became both a community and international affair. It appeared as if a stronger sense of 'East German-ness' was being felt since the Berlin Wall fell because of a shared history and culture among East Germans and the failure to connect with West Germans. Embracing GDR artifacts could also be understood as a form of reaction to Western capitalism that did not appreciate the value of those who had grown up and lived under a socialist system. In a climate where the whole German Democratic Republic was condemned as a failed experiment, these old GDR objects were the remains of socialism.

It was for these reasons that East German consumer behaviour made a dramatic U-turn, and began to assert their distinct consumer identity through demanding the return of old familiar Eastern products and brands that had disappeared off of their shelves (Hogwood, Citizens as Consumers 53-54). Moreover, it was in this atmosphere that East German material culture developed as an alternative to Western consumerism.

### 3.5 Criticisms of *Ostalgie*

While *Ostalgie* was embraced by East Germans as a way of coming to terms with their history, many West German politicians and historians saw *Ostalgie* as an unsettling influence in the new Germany because it both undermined an objective historical evaluation of the GDR period, and threatened the project of inner unity between the two Germanys. However, the revival of these *Ostalgie* goods in East and West Germany have become recognizable to East and West Germans and this has helped to keep the

memory of the GDR alive; whether reinvented or not, these objects are still associated with East Germany.

Another criticism explains historian Paul Cooke is that:

For its critics *Ostalgie* is a dangerous form of selective amnesia that sees the East German state through rose-tinted spectacles, ignoring the problems of life there and idealizing it instead as a land where, for example, there was no unemployment and a strong sense of community existed. (Representing East Germany 104)

According to Cooke, *Ostalgie* provides the opportunity to avoid questions of responsibility and accountability to the GDR past. For example, it ignores the problems of oppression, the role of the Stasi, and intimidation. However, at the same time, this dismissal of *Ostalgie* tends to devalue East German critiques of themselves and the politics of unification.

There is also a fear that looking at material objects may lead to the problem of creating a fetish over their memory. The creation of furniture, dishes, camping gear, and televisions do not say anything especially unique about East Germany; they happened in spite of everything, but the implication and the development of these items is important. Moreover, looking at these objects makes life in East Germany quite normal criticizes historian Eli Rubin, who writes:

Worse, they affect a romanticized impression of life in the GDR, they encourage a false nostalgia that feeds on an illusion of normality masquerading as a memory, a charge that has at times been leveled at those who have done work on everyday



life and especially the history of consumption in the GDR. (Plastics and Dictatorship 7)

However, such longing for the past was more than an escapist defense mechanism against the dissatisfaction of German unity, and the illusion that life was incredibly better than in the unified Germany. Rather it was part of the changing nature of the East German historical consciousness and collective memory.

## **Chapter Four: EAST GERMAN MATERIAL CULTURE AFTER THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL**

### **4.1 Reappearance of Material Culture**

In the ensuing euphoria over unification, it appeared as if everything that was connected to the GDR “was destined for the rubbish heap of history” (Blum 229).

However, only a few years after 1989, some of the most unlikely remnants of the GDR have made a remarkable comeback and old products and brand names have reappeared in new forms. This nostalgia has seen material objects from the former GDR be revived, reproduced, commercialized, and placed in museums to represent the everyday life of the GDR. The change from embracing Western to embracing Eastern goods happened quickly. According to surveys done both by Patricia Hogwood and Andreas Staab, between December 1990 and December 1991, the proportion of Eastern households preferring Eastern products over Western had risen from half to almost three-quarters (Hogwood, Citizens as Consumers 54; Staab 116). However, Hogwood and Staab do not give suggestions as to what instigated this dramatic change to embrace East German

material culture in 1991. Nevertheless, the revival of artifacts from the GDR attests to a collective public memory of the past.

The history of East Germany is being remembered communicatively, collectively, and culturally by various actors through material culture. For example, curators at museums are recreating the cultural memory of the GDR by collecting consumer goods. Their purpose is to give a glimpse into the everyday life of East Germans, alongside, or in place of the view of the Eastern Bloc country as simply a totalitarian state. East Germans have been collectively remembering the GDR by continuing to buy the products that were familiar to them during the time of the GDR. Many young East Germans who were too young to really comprehend the days of socialist rule or the imposing structure of the Berlin Wall have also spurred interest in reviving material products of the GDR, such as food items, music, and clothing. With the loss of institutions and structures, material culture is the last remaining representation of these young peoples' family history. East Germans are not the only ones re-imagining their past, many young West Germans have also been busy buying remaining ex-GDR objects from flea markets, newspapers, and the internet because 'reliving the socialist experience' was considered trendy in the late 1990s. Soon after 1989, Western companies began exploring new markets by buying up Eastern companies and advertising their goods to appeal to East Germans..

It is difficult to determine how popular and widespread this nostalgia by East and West Germans for East German material culture really was after 1989, or continues to be now. However, the ongoing exhibitions, the existing internet sites that sell nostalgic East German items and the continuing research on East German material culture all speak to

the fact that material culture as a source of memory of the ex-GDR is still important for both East and West Germans.

#### **4.2 Material Artifacts in Museums**

East and West German curators have been instrumental in collecting East German material artifacts, and displaying them in museums and exhibitions in order to preserve and elicit communicative, collective, and cultural memories of the former GDR. Sometimes this memory is made into an ironic statement of East Germany. For example, one of the first exhibitions of GDR popular culture was held at the Habernoll Gallery near Frankfurt-am-Main in December 1989. Two West Germans traveled to the GDR a few months before the opening of the Berlin Wall and went on an 'archaeological excursion' to collect carloads of East German everyday objects, ranging from soap labels to underwear. However, their show, mockingly entitled, "SED: Stunning Eastern Design" merely ridiculed the boring material culture of the East in comparison to the superior tastes of the sophisticated Western culture (Scribner 175). The artists considered East German design to be frozen in time and that the articles they found in the GDR in 1989 could have been found in the Federal Republic of Germany twenty to thirty years before.

The more recent exhibitions, on the other hand, strive to present a much more complicated and balanced image of everyday life in the former GDR. In the past twenty years, there have been several separate exhibitions in museums with the themes of GDR everyday life, consumer culture and popular culture. There have been exhibitions with titles that include "The Miracle Economy: Consumer Culture in the GDR in the 1960s"

and “Commodities for Daily Use: Four Decades of Products Made in the GDR”. These exhibitions and others help to recall the life lived by East Germans under socialism by engaging with the cultural memory of material objects (Scribner 171). At Bonn’s *Haus der Geschichte* (“House of History”) museum, the cold war rivalries between East and West are contrasted in terms of material output and consumerism. The permanent, onsite collection contains 6,000 objects and documents, and exhibitions from the museum travel throughout Germany. The *Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig* (“Forum of Contemporary History in Leipzig”) commemorates the resistance and opposition that took place in the GDR against the socialist regime through the documentation of 2,500 objects, pictures, and documents (Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland). The gallery holds lectures and workshops in connection with its exhibitions, documents, and information center in order to analyze and discuss contemporary German history from the end of the Second World War to the present.

In the East German city of Eisenhüttenstadt, one can visit *Das Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* (“Documentation Center for the Everyday Life of the GDR”) and step back into the consumer age of the old East Germany (Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR). This museum contains thousands of objects from everyday life of East Germans before 1989, including old schoolbooks, radios, televisions, cameras, photographs, and toys. They remind the viewer of everyday life in the GDR, including youth culture, family and free time, living conditions, working, and shopping (Ludwig 8). Altogether, the museum holds more than 50,000 objects, many of which were rescued when East German households purged their houses of

everything 'Eastern' and abandoned these items by the curbside (Rubin, Plastics and Dictatorship 1-2).

The museum draws heavily from its urban surroundings of Eisenhüttenstadt, a city located not far from the Polish border and a city marked by the history of Central Europe. When the GDR was founded, Eisenhüttenstadt was actually named "Stalinstadt" and was considered to be the 'first German socialist city'. Only after Stalin's death in the mid-1950s did it regain its former name Eisenhüttenstadt, which literally means 'Steelworks City'. Despite this name change, it is still exemplary of its Soviet satellite past because, unlike other East European cities, Eisenhüttenstadt has retained most of its street names, so citizens can stroll down streets that are named after communist revolutionaries like Karl-Liebknecht-Straße or Clara Zetkin-Ring (Scribner 175-176).

Museums, like the "Documentation Center for the Everyday Life of the GDR" in Eisenhüttenstadt offer a place for citizens from the former GDR to come together, remember, and discuss the past collectively and culturally. The museum also offers a place of interest for visitors who are curious about the former GDR. The museums focus on the gains as well as the losses of living with goods produced for a 'classless' society. Rather than fetishizing over the GDR past, the exhibitions help to remind the viewer of Germany's divided past, and helps to solidify the collective memory work for the successes and failures of the socialist project.

These exhibitions play an important role of grounding the East German memory in the material objects and structures that have been left behind. Scribner writes, "In the absence of the wall and other cold war symbols of the nation's punishment-by-division, Germans see these museums as the enduring stigmata of their violent history" (184). The

conservation of these everyday objects helps to remember the reason for, and the experience of, the division of Germany, although there is wide disagreement on how best to recollect this GDR material culture. Nevertheless, Betts writes that “there is little dispute that such ‘consumer socialism’ remains fundamental to the meaning and future of GDR history” (Betts 763).

### 4.3 Examples of Material Culture

East German material culture is not only remembered in museums and archives, but also in popular culture, and everyday life in the former GDR. The re-created material culture has evolved in four different ways: first, objects have been revived from the former GDR, and East Germans continue to buy these products that exist, to a great extent as they did before 1989. Second, for young East Germans, objects and experiences have been made to elicit memories of the GDR with the tendency to ironize *Ostalgie*. Third, objects have been revived from the old GDR, but have developed new meanings and symbolism for East and West Germans. Fourth, not only were East German goods revived and reinvented, but companies have changed their advertising and packaging strategies to meet the expectations of Eastern consumers.

First, East Germans are able to continue to interact with certain objects as they did before German unification. *Florena* cream is an example of an object that was able to survive the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is true that *Florena* cream has been exhibited in one of the recreated GDR bathrooms at the Eisenhüttenstadt museum, “Documentation Center for the Everyday Life of the GDR” to elicit life as it was lived in the GDR, but it also continues to be distributed in pharmacies and grocery stores primarily in the East,

but also in the West. As a recognizable beauty product in its small, blue, disk-like container, *Florena* is similar to the *Nivea* tins which are a common sight in the Federal Republic of Germany. Yet Scribner writes, “. . . *Florena* tins are just one minuscule detail characterizing the complexity and contradiction of contemporary German-German culture” (179). It points to the fact that the GDR no longer exists politically or economically, but socially and emotionally, memories of the GDR in these material objects like *Florena* cream are still very alive.

Since the introduction of *Florena* cream in 1852 by A.H.A. Bergmann, the skin cream has survived and kept its original name *Florena* despite the many historical changes and interruptions. Although Germany was divided into two states in 1949, the Waldheim manufacturer was able to keep the appearance of *Florena* very similar to that of the West because of the exchange that was still possible before the construction of the Wall. It also kept its advertising message very similar to West Germany, and maintained its use of italics for the graphics of their brand name. In the 1950s, the soap featured an idyllic family scene with a mother wearing a dress and a bath towel draped over one arm as she bathes her child.

The similarity of the products' appearance in East and West altered in the 1960s with the building of the Berlin Wall. *Florena* made changes to its packaging to suit the new socialist requirements of design and function, whereby the packaging was to reflect the contents inside. The company designed the round metal tin for its skin cream that is still recognizable today. The ornate graphics were replaced by clean capitals, and the lid of the round tin was segmented with the traditional *Florena* colours, blue and white. The name was also segmented into two complementary semicircles, each bearing a word-

*Florena* and *Crème*. Very modern in its appearance, it is difficult to distinguish this quality product from other Western products like *Nivea* and is an example of where the aesthetics of socialist design were implemented successfully (Blum 239). In 1992, three new managers took control of Florena Cosmetic GmbH, and gave a design make-over to the *Florena* tin. However, it still looks very similar to the design prior to 1989, and the company is still located in Waldheim. In 2004, 80% of its exports went to Russia and the Ukraine and 20% to other countries. Within the 20%, *Florena* has found a market niche among young East and West Germans who find it trendy to use *Florena*, a product from the East (Florena Cosmetic GmbH).

There has been a tendency among older East German consumers to prefer products and foodstuff with old GDR labels as a symbol of East German continuity and identity. Objects that were thought to have disappeared from the shelves of German supermarkets have made a remarkable comeback and have been enjoying rapidly rising sales in the former East Germany. These include *Rotkäppchen* champagne, a sweet and artificial tasting sparkling wine; *Burger Knäcke*, a crispbread from Saxony-Anhalt; quick lentils called *Tempo-linsen* that can be cooked in ten minutes; and *Spreewälder Gurken*, pickles made famous by the *Goodbye Lenin!* movie. Restaurants have also opened up that recall the food in the former GDR. For example, in East Berlin there is a restaurant called *Mauerblümchen* ("Wallflower") that sometimes has a two-day waiting list for reservations. One of the main features on the menu is an Ukrainian sausage stew called *Soljanka*, which was a mainstay in GDR factory canteens, and often the signature dish at German-Soviet Friendship functions (Scribner 174).



In competition with Western consumerism and Western domination, a supermarket chain in Leipzig, *Konsum Leipzig*, is one of the very few surviving East German enterprises in the midst of a landscape dominated by Western discount stores. *Konsum Leipzig* functions as a cooperative and specializes in selling products produced in the former GDR, often by re-privatized firms. One aim of the Leipzig supermarket is to teach citizens about the workings of a market economy and the consumers' choice to manufacture products that were produced in the former GDR. The *Konsum* stores encourage buying locally as a way of strengthening the economy and creating jobs. In addition, it protests against the large Western retail chains and discount stores that quickly entered the East German market after the currency union in 1990, driving many local shops out of business (Berdahl, '(N)Ostalgie' for the Present 199-201).

Examples of cultural products that were revived as material culture shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall and marketed exclusively for the East include the music of old East German rock bands and familiar FDJ songs, a grassroots campaign to save the ex-GDR radio station *DT-64* which was eventually replaced in 1993 by the *Sputnik* radio station, and books and magazines like the *Super-Illu* magazine. East German films made by DEFA (*Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*), which held a state monopoly on filmmaking in the GDR, have been reissued and sold out. Films include Wolfgang Staudte's "*Die Mörder Sind Unter Uns*" (The Murderers Are Among Us, 1946), Hermann Zschoche's "*Carla*" (Carla, 1965) and Ulrich Plenzdorf's "*Die Legende von Paul und Paula*" (The Legend of Paul and Paula, 1973).

Other products are being marketed and are becoming known throughout East and West Germany because Western manufacturers have bought up the rights for certain

foods from the East and are advertising them throughout Germany. For example, *Radeberger* beer, an important export for East Germany during the communist era was later bought up by West German company "Binding" after 1989. In 2002, the company opted for the East German name, the "Radeberger" group and the beer continues to be popular in both East and West Germany. *Vita Cola*, the East German cola drink, faced huge competition from Coca Cola and Pepsi with the fall of the Berlin Wall. A West German company "Brau & Brunnen" bought up the rights to *Vita Cola*, and in 1994 the drink was re-launched with the same taste and packaging. Later in 2005, the Hessen Company "Hassia Mineralquellen" took over and continued producing the drink in its original form and has also been considered quite successful. In 2006 the company owned 44 percent of the market share in Thuringia, and is second place behind Coca-Cola in the former East Germany, although it has not had the same success in West Germany (Expatica).

Moreover, the revival of East German material culture has become increasingly popular among young West Germans who have been busy buying up these remaining ex-GDR objects from flea markets and newspapers advertising old GDR articles. Historian Ina Merkel makes the remark that, "It would be interesting to discover which objects produced in the GDR still exist in Eastern German households, are needed and used there, and which objects have found a place as representative pieces in Western German cupboards" (Consumer Culture 297). One of the biggest draws for young East and West Germans were those items that still functioned twenty to thirty years later, like the vacuum cleaner, toaster, place settings, and laundry basket. Not only have young East and West Germans collected these old GDR artifacts, but they have tried to relive the

experience of the East by moving eastwards and taking over East Berlin neighbourhoods, with the East German P2 apartments being especially popular. They then would buy up countless East German artifacts from the internet to fill up their “East German” apartments with Eastern goods (Rubin, Plastics and Dictatorships 495-496).

Second, objects and experiences have been used to elicit collective and cultural memories of the GDR, including television shows, books, movies, parties, and theme parks. This has been especially appealing to the youth of the GDR who were too young to remember the socialist ideology or the constraints of the Berlin Wall. However, the meaning of everyday culture from the former GDR tends to be ironized and has created a new memory of the past. For example, the old GDR customs house called “Palace of Tears” (*Tränenpalast*), named for the tearful partings between visitors from the West visiting the East, has been converted into a nightclub and popular theatre. Although it has kept the same name and its décor and music evoke pre-1989 East Berlin, its purpose has changed.

Books are being written by authors telling about their experiences as children in the East including Ingo Schramm’s *Fitchers Blau* (Fitcher’s Blue), Tomas Brussig’s *Helden wie wir* (Heroes like us) and Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Storys* (sic). *Ein Roman aus der ostdeutschen Provinz* (Simple Stories. A novel from the East German provinces). DDR parties have been celebrated in the big cities of Berlin and Leipzig. Guests arrive wearing FDJ (youth-league) uniforms and dance to old Eastern Bands including *Die Puhdys* or *Karat* (Theil 16).

Board games have been created to prompt memory of the old GDR. For example, one such board game is ‘Memory’ or ‘*Gedächtnis*’, where players prove their ability to

recall the placement of overturned pairs of cards depicting images and icons once familiar to the GDR. A similar board game designed by two East German university students named *Kost the Ost* (Taste the East), has players trying to guess forty-six different GDR food brand labels. Not only does the packaging of the game evoke memories of the GDR with its quality awards, labels, and brand names, but also the rules of the game recreate some of the specific conditions of the East German marketplace. The popularity of the game is demonstrated by the fact that an overwhelming 10,000 games were sold within the first week of being on the market in late 1996 (Berdahl, '(N)Ostalgie' for the Present 197).

In 1993, Frank Georgi proposed a Disney-esque East German theme park called the "Ossi Park"—in which barbed wire, *Trabants*, Stasi agents, currency exchange, and even scratchy GDR toilet paper would all be used to depict East German life. According to Georgi, the theme park was meant to be an educational experience of everyday life behind the Wall for those curious about East Germany, and it is not an attempt to trivialize the GDR (Hogwood, After the GDR 56).

Movies created by both East and West German filmmakers have also helped to boost enthusiasm and shed some positive light on life in the GDR. They have instigated new interest in material culture and have established a cultural memory of the GDR in people's minds. Some of these films include Peter Timm's *Go Trabi, Go* (1991 and 1992), which shows the process of the East trying to catch up with the West and Leander Haußmann's *Sonnenallee* ("Sun Alley"), which, released in 1999, was the first movie to engage with the issue of nostalgia. According to historian Paul Cook, Leander Haußmann's hit youth comedy *Sonnenallee* highlights the competing tension at work

within contemporary nostalgia for the East German state. The film was a response to the fears of many East Germans that their everyday experience was being omitted from historical records. While the film highlights the importance of cultural traditions of the GDR, it challenges the rose-tinted view of the East. In this movie, director Leander Haußmann explores the reasons why East Germans feel the need to return to the past. Secondly, he tries to make the Eastern experience less exotic. Ultimately, writes Cooke, the film forces the East German viewer to reflect upon *Ostalgie* and reject any manifestation of it that would call for a return of the GDR (Cooke, Performing 'Ostalgie' 156-158).

Haußmann's *Sonnenallee* was followed by the West German director Oskar Roehler's *Die Unberührbare* ("No Place to Go", 2000) and Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye Lenin!* (2002). Some identify the success of the film, *Goodbye, Lenin!*, a bittersweet comedy set during the time of unification, as instigating this trend towards positive nostalgia. It became a successful hit in the former GDR as well as throughout the world and was the winner of the 2003 Berlin Film Festival's award for best European picture. In the film, a teacher falls into a coma after seeing her son beaten by GDR police at a protest rally in late 1989. She wakes up eight months later, after the Berlin Wall has come down and East Germany is history. In order to avoid shocking her into another heart attack, her son painstakingly recreates an artificial East Germany within the confines of their tiny apartment, complete with GDR labels and homemade TV news, "Aktuelle Kamera", that helps to explain the 'capitalist' events outside. As the mother looks out the window, she wonders why there are more *Opel* in the street than *Trabant* and her son tells her that East Germany has opened its borders to Westerners fleeing the

failure of capitalism. Soon, however the wall comes down in their fictitious universe, toppled by the collapse of the West (not the East). The movie brings to light the sudden disappearance of East Germany and the speedy replacement of all things “Eastern” with Western laws and institutions, consumer products, and popular culture (Theil 16-17).

Responding to the success of these movies, in the late 1990s, and especially after 2003 with the success of the movie *Goodbye Lenin!*, a plethora of DDR shows focusing on the nostalgia for all things from the East became immensely popular with both East and West viewers, although not without criticism. These television shows included the *Ostalgie Show*, *Ein Kessel DDR* (“A Pot of GDR”), *Meyer und Schulz: Die ultimate Ost-Show* (“Meyer and Schulz: The Ultimate East Show”) and *DDR Show*. All of these TV shows reminisce about the good times of the GDR when times were different, but perceived as better. The shows reference the everyday life, and more specifically the GDR’s consumer and leisure culture with the aim of ‘normalizing’ the experience of living in the GDR, while at the same time making the ‘normal’ exotic. The everyday objects are exotic because they remain peripheral to Western consumer culture (Cooke, Representing East Germany 141-142, 156-157). On the *DDR Show*, ex-ice-skating champion Katarina Witt sings socialist songs and raves about her days in the communist youth league; the boxer Henry Maske drives into the studio in his *Trabant* and together they dance the *Lipsi*, a “communist” dance and alternative to rock and roll (Osang 212-214). Everyone appears to be having a good time on the show, except for one lady, writes Stefan Thiel, the author of Berlin Dispatch: Red Again. Thiel explains how this woman spent eight years in a prison camp for smearing lipstick on a picture of Joseph Stalin when she was 14 years old (16).

The value of these TV shows has not escaped criticism. On the one hand, there are those that argue that these shows do not represent the GDR as an oppressive dictatorship, clearly enough. Then again, others claim that the everyday 'normal' experiences of GDR citizens should not be ignored (Cooke, Representing East Germany 144). Also debatable is whether the everyday experiences of East Germans are being represented appropriately in these TV shows? Although East Germans watch these shows, and many acknowledge that they do so because it gives them something to be annoyed about, Cooke quotes that 59% of those surveyed in a poll carried out by "Emnid" in 2004 claimed that they disapproved of the image of the GDR that these shows presented (Representing East Germany 144). These shows were seen by East Germans as another appropriation of the GDR by the West, even though this appropriation was responding to the call by East Germans for an everyday view of the past.

A flourishing *Ostalgie* market has also appeared on the internet to help people reminisce about the past and has become quite popular among young people because of the easy access and simplicity of online ordering. Some internet suppliers of GDR products include *Ostprodukte*, [www.ostprodukte.de](http://www.ostprodukte.de), *Ossiladen*, [www.ossiladen.de](http://www.ossiladen.de), *Ostwarenversand*, [www.ostwarenversand.de](http://www.ostwarenversand.de), *Mondos Arts*, [www.mondosarts.de](http://www.mondosarts.de), and Ebay also has a whole section dedicated to GDR products at [www.ebay.de](http://www.ebay.de).

The biggest internet supplier of GDR items, *Ossi-Versand* ([www.ossiversand.de](http://www.ossiversand.de)) had so much media interest in it after the success of the movie *Goodbye Lenin!* that it collapsed in 2003, but a year later was back into business. Historian Paul Cooke highlights that at the time of its collapse, eighty-five percent of the *Ossi-Versand's*

customer base was in the old Federal states of West Germany. According to a study done in 2003 by the Institute for Applied Marketing and Communications in Erfurt (Institute für angewandte Marketing- und Kommunikationsforschung), it:

found that a growing number of east German products have become just as important to western as they are to eastern consumers, with brands such as *Radeberger* beer and *Rotkäppchen* being recognized by over 90 per cent of those surveyed. (qtd. in Cooke, Representing East Germany 149)

Cooke gives two reasons for this phenomenon: first, “the role of east German consumer culture is going beyond that of simply marking East German difference” and second, “it suggests that eastern culture has become part of the mainstream, at last achieving the ‘normality’ advertisers have long exploited” (Representing East Germany 149-150). However, historian Paul Cooke does not mention whether this interest in *Ostalgie* products comes from former East Germans who are now living in the West, or from West Germans genuinely interested in the GDR. As well, he does not distinguish the age group, the gender, or employment status of who was interested in these *Ostalgie* products.

Third, some objects have been relegated to the past, but others have struggled to survive and have re-emerged, sometimes in new and different forms. An example of a product that has continued to exist, but with some difficulty is the *Ampelmännchen*, the traffic light figure that adorned East German city crosswalks. When it is time to go, the East German *Ampelmännchen*, a short and stocky man is green, walks with purpose, with a hat on his head and a tool in his hand. When it is time to stop, he is red with his arms spread out. Initially, the existence of the little traffic man was challenged in the mid-



1990s when in a policy reform, the European Union (EU) requested that the *Ampelmännchen* be replaced with the West German traffic light; a tall lean man, in an attempt to standardize traffic signals across Europe. This request outraged many East Germans who felt that the removal of the traffic light was a symbol of their own replacement by the laws and institutions of the West. They began campaigning against the EU and West Germany in a protest called "Save the *Ampelmännchen*", and sold t-shirts of the little figure to raise awareness. The East German traffic figure returned to some parts of East Berlin by popular demand and has become an important tool of the tourist industry. The *Ampelmännchen* is now an iconic figure, recognizable to many tourists visiting Berlin, and can be found in tourist shops in various guises: on t-shirts, cups, bags, table lamps, and other paraphernalia.

Probably the most telling example of a product that was not able to survive the transition to capitalism is the standard-issue *Trabant* car. The *Trabi*, which East German motorists could not drop quickly enough upon unification, has now become a cult object. The *Trabi* was produced by auto maker VEB Sachsenring Automobilwerke Zwickau in Saxony. It was a small, boxy car made of fiberglass and pressed cotton with a two-stroke engine. Often East Germans had to wait fifteen years before they could obtain a *Trabi*. Despite the long waiting lists, the car was quite popular in East Germany (partly because it was one of the only cars available in the East) and was also exported to other socialist countries. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the *Trabi* lost its monetary value and became the butt of many West German jokes as being exemplary of the failed socialist state of the GDR, and hence its people too (Berdahl, '(N)Ostalgie' for the Present 195).

Although it did not survive the transition, the car has found a second life as a representation. The image of the *Trabant* adorns everything from the pages of cult books, t-shirts, retro postcards to mugs, card games, and websites of East Germany. Initially, West Germans coveted these *Trabants* as a quaint collectors' item, but East Germans also began *Trabi* clubs and fan newsletters. The *Trabi* has also been instrumentalized as a Berlin tourist attraction, with people being encouraged to go on "Trabi Safaris" by hiring the car and traveling around the city centre for the day. The *Trabant* was even featured on U2's "Achtung Baby" album cover. The marketing of the *Trabant* as a tourist production shows a clear shift in the treatment of East German goods, from being disdained to being a popular iconic consumer product. While the GDR no longer exists, the *Trabant* and a significant number of other material products have left a legacy that is still very much alive. Additionally, this new proliferation of interest in GDR consumer goods has shown them to be accepted, with some items reaching cult status. These goods are no longer the 'normal' everyday products of the East, but have turned into objects of exoticism, traded as commodities.

Fourth, not only were East German products revived and reinvented, but companies realized that if they wanted to sell their products in East Germany they would have to change their methods of advertising and packaging. Small Eastern companies started to advertise their products' East German origin, but some large Western manufacturers also realized the economic potential, and began to (re)introduce products and brands that would have been familiar to consumers of the former German Democratic Republic (Blum 229).

Patricia Hogwood cites the example of *Persil* washing detergent, which adjusted its advertising campaign specifically for the East. She writes, "The (*Persil*) advert showed a middle-aged woman executive returning to work. Her husband and children couldn't cope without her until she discovered new Persil capsules" (Citizens as Consumers 55). The *Persil* retailers, *Fritzsche und Makat* found that this advertisement was causing major offence in the East. Prior to unification, Eastern women had been accustomed to working all their adult lives and were offended at the implication that "... it was somehow wrong to 'leave' your family to go back to work" (Hogwood, Citizens as Consumers 55). Moreover, Hogwood suggests that East German women disliked the snobbish lifestyle of the advertisement. As an alternative, instead of highlighting the prejudices of patriarchy, *Fritzsche und Makat* came up with a campaign that focused on the functional aspect of the product *Persil*, that it was able to preserve colour fastness in the wash. They even built in references to the East's socialist past through political colour symbolism and came up with the slogan, 'Red is for love—let's keep it that way'.

The marketing agency *Fritzsche und Makat* has been specifically successful in advertising for the former GDR. They have found that superlatives such as 'the best' or 'number one' are not as effective in the East as they were in the West because they reference a capitalist, stylish, and luxurious lifestyle. Instead, *Fritzsche und Makat* stressed the 'old-fashioned' values of orderliness, discipline, and modesty. In addition, they observed that Eastern consumers appreciated functionality and advertising that was addressed to regular, hard-working people. Are these attributes that Western manufacturers observe created for the East by the West, or did these preferences for orderliness, discipline, and modesty develop out of the socialist experience that stressed

functionality and hard work? Patricia Hogwood suggests that the reason for these preferences is that the GDR was a 'working socialist society', where the intensity of acquiring more as a way of establishing status was not as strong or as possible as it was in the West (Citizens as Consumers 55).

An example of where a former GDR product has gone under rapid transformation regarding design and quality, but kept its original brand name, is cigarettes. The US cigarette company owned by Philip Morris only sold "F6" cigarettes in the East and advertised them as being familiar, a symbol of tradition and persistence in a time of sweeping changes, and an example of the continuity of East German history. Morris stressed that the cigarette continued to have the traditional strong taste even in the time of great change with unification. Instead of emphasizing sophistication and affluence like many Western advertisements promoted, Philip Morris also chose to highlight tradition and authenticity, giving the impression that the GDR had made valuable achievements that had the right to live on. Slogans, such as "the taste stays the same," "the original from *Dresden*," or "the classic" made reference to a time before unification and were incredibly popular in East Germany when they originally came out. At the end of 1989, "F6" possessed 13 percent of the market share on the Eastern market. One year later, market share reached an astonishing peak of 33 percent, then declined slightly in 1994 to 31 percent and further yet in 1996 to 27 percent. Although still doing relatively well, "F6" has not been as successful in the West and historian Staab suggests that this is possibly because of its advertising strategies to the East do not entice Western consumers (116-117).

In this business of *Ostalgie*, East German material products have taken on new meaning when used for the second time. Removed from their original context of an economy of shortages, these products help to elicit the GDR, but largely recall an East Germany that never existed. Daphne Berdahl writes, “They thus illustrate not only the way in which memory is an interactive, malleable, and highly contested phenomenon, but also the processes through which things become informed with a remembering—and forgetting—capacity” (*‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present* 198). Although there is a connection to past experiences, these material objects have evolved since 1989 and represent the active remembering and forgetting of their past.

## **Chapter V: CONCLUSION**

The study of *Alltagsgeschichte* of East Germany is part of an on-going discourse in trying to find the best way to understand the history of the German Democratic Republic. Instead of a top-down account of the history of the GDR that centers on the structures of the political system, the Stasi, and the SED, *Alltagsgeschichte* is written from the bottom-up about the lives of East German citizens; their actions, perceptions, and practices as they contributed to GDR society. Although the study of everyday life in the GDR helps to illuminate the lives of East Germans, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and others that study *Alltagsgeschichte* are often criticized for losing sight of the broader context of important events, powerful people, and institutions that shaped East Germans everyday lives. A better balance is required in analyzing the power of the state with the actions and experiences of the GDR society. For example, how did East Germans conform, oppose, and negotiate the rules of the SED in regards to

material culture (as is explored in this thesis)? It has been recognized that this balance is difficult to attain because secondary sources often lend themselves to a pure *Alltagsgeschichte* or *Parteiengeschichte*, instead of finding a middle ground between the two paradigms.

Another problem with *Alltagsgeschichte* is that there is no agreement or clear boundary surrounding the definition of “state” and “society”. These terms need to be better defined in order to provide a clearer understanding of *Alltagsgeschichte*. Epstein exemplifies the problem by citing the West German sociologist Sigrid Meuschel who argued that “society” did not even exist in the GDR because the SED ultimately homogenized East German society and eliminated all classes or other independent groupings (645). Those who criticize Meuschel argue that in a variety of ways East Germans as individuals or groups did challenge the SED regime.

Although this thesis attempted to make the connection between the state and society through material culture and strived to sketch out the evolving nature of material culture both before and after 1989, a more in-depth study would be required to address some of the following related questions: Is material culture an appropriate avenue for understanding the GDR past? Or does the study of material culture create a fetish out of material objects? What is the future of GDR material goods? Can the reinvention of GDR material culture still speak to a unique East German past? And can life in the GDR ever be considered ‘normal’ as the historians of *Alltagsgeschichte* support? This thesis and the secondary sources do not in any way try to resolve the competing narratives of the past or offer any final answers; rather the history of the GDR continues to be ambiguous and requires more research.

Additionally, although examples of the revived and renewed material culture are given in this thesis, more concentration would be required on who is reviving these articles of material culture, why they are reviving them and what new meanings have developed out of this GDR material culture. Generally, the secondary sources lack information on how the consumer groups are defined; in particular, which East Germans were dissatisfied with East German material culture before 1989 and which East Germans helped to revive this material culture after the fall of the Berlin Wall. While Merkel, Rubin, Ten Dyke, and Veenis strive to make the connection between consumer goods and the people buying consumer goods through using primary sources; such as oral history interviews, letters, and feature films to illustrate everyday life in the GDR; other historians are not as successful in their approach. Betts, Blum, Kopstein, Nothnagle, Scribner, Staab, and others give examples of material culture and memory, but they do not connect material culture with the lives of the people, even though they insist on approaching history from the point of view of *Alltagsgeschichte*. Looking at the demographics of East Germans would help to illuminate the experiences and feelings towards material culture both before and after 1989. The continuity and change in consumer culture needs to be studied, as well as the different generational response to consumer culture.

It has been suggested by Epstein that the reason for this failure to connect East German people with their objects is that few historians have actually gone out and done the archival work deemed necessary for GDR history. Epstein writes, "Instead most have confined themselves to making programmatic statements about how East German history should be written. The history of the GDR has thus largely been written by graduate

students" (658-659). Another reason may include that *Alltagsgeschichte* is still developing as a methodology and therefore has not been able to make a strong connection between state, society and material culture. The writing of GDR history is also made difficult by the diversity of perspectives of the past taken from a diversity of perspectives of the present. Furthermore, a major complaint in the discussion of East German history as suggested by Dennis and Kolinsky, Epstein, and Fulbrook, is that historians, sociologists, psychologists, and others cannot separate their present politics from their historical writing.

Material culture is one way of remembering the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) of East Germans in the former German Democratic Republic. The memory of East Germany: expressed communicatively, collectively, and culturally has been recreated and reinterpreted in material culture among former and new consumers in Germany. Although the SED strived to provide enough range, quality, and availability of consumer goods for its citizens, without compromising its socialist ideology on consumption, it could not compete with the wealth of material goods in the West. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the socialist government, material culture was revived to preserve the memories of the GDR and soon became part of a new consumer culture.

This thesis sought to comprehend how and why these former GDR consumer objects emerged as new historical indicators of the socialist experience and become part of collective memories or of a collective consumer culture. Additionally, it set out to understand whether East Germany, a socialist country that was despised for its poor



quality and quantity of consumer goods, can be remembered after the fall of the Berlin Wall as a genuine consumer society.

The history of material culture from the GDR has been marked by the ongoing competition and comparison with the West both before and after 1989. From the 1950s and on, the SED understood that providing consumer goods would be important in establishing state legitimacy and support for their country. They were also very aware of the 'Economic Miracle' happening on the other side of the Iron Curtain and that the rise in living standards was drawing East German citizens towards West Germany. The penetration of West German television and advertisement in the East continually undermined the claims of the SED to provide consumer goods to its people. In contrast, the FRG appeared to deliver all the promises that the GDR failed to, such as prosperity and wealth of material goods.

Therefore, a tension existed among leaders of the GDR in trying to provide for its citizens according to the Soviet model of consumerism and compete with the prosperity of West Germany. While conforming to the socialist ideology of consumption, the SED created consumer goods that were practical and functional, rather than imitating the ornamental designs they saw being espoused in the West. These principles of functionality and purposefulness turned out to be quite convenient too, because it was easier, cheaper, and faster to produce goods. However, the GDR economy suffered from a lack of resources that exacerbated the quality and quantity of goods. This led to persistent shortages and long waiting lists for products. In order to solve this lack of natural resources, the regime developed new strategies to imitate products. For example, it made a massive investment into synthetics and created the *Chemieprogramm*, a

program that tried to synthesize materials which it could not find naturally. However, the Chemistry Program had difficulties acquiring enough oil from the Soviet Union and the SED did not have enough Western currency to purchase technology from the United Kingdom to produce plastics.

During the consumer euphoria of 1989, East German products hardly stood a chance of surviving among the introduction of Western products. With the flood of new products into the former Soviet-bloc, and therefore the increase of products with corresponding advertisements and attractive packaging, East Germans abandoned their own products in favour of Western brands (Feick and Gierl 228). In spite of the disparity of income between the two Germanys, East Germans were able to gather enough money because of the favourable exchange rate to become consumers of the West after the *Wende*. The first consumer experiences were euphoric, but this soon wore off as Easterners became disillusioned and dissatisfied with the unification.

Mass unemployment, economic change, social disintegration, and political pressure instigated nostalgia, otherwise known as *Ostalgie*, for the stability and solidarity of the GDR. East Germans began to yearn for certain aspects of the GDR, including the social welfare system, subsidized housing, child care, community support, employment for all, and cheap basic necessities. Disillusioned with unification, material culture and *Ostalgie* were embraced as a “defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals” (Boym xiv). East Germans resented the process of unification and the idea that anything that was perceived to be “East German” was unsuitable for the new system of democracy and capitalism. Attitudes prevailed among many unhappy East Germans that unification represented a capitalist takeover and colonization by the West,

since the political, cultural, and economic structures of the West were simply extended to the Eastern *Länder* (Staab 123-124).

Following the *Wende*, people longed for a little piece of familiarity, and this seemed to be offered by GDR products. GDR products were attributed with positive traits such as trust, good value for money, integrity, and honesty (for example, F6 cigarettes), in contrast to the untrustworthy products of the West. They reminded East Germans of a time that was slower-paced and less complicated (Jarausch 8). In buying Eastern products like *Florena* and *Radeberger* beer, driving their *Trabants*, remembering brand names like *Spee* and *Vita Cola*, and other elements of everyday life, a certain group of East German consumers continued to assert themselves in a culture where they did not feel appreciated. Embracing material culture, however, did not necessarily mean a desire to return to the past, but rather was an expression of the displeasure with the current political, social, economical, and cultural situation in Germany.

Ironically, material culture became an emerging commercial market for Germany on a domestic and international scale. Different actors from all levels of society in East and West Germany have been collectively participating in remembering the material culture of East Germany: by communicating their experiences and culturally preserving their memories in objects. Although these objects help to elicit the memory of East Germany, they have taken on new meaning and largely recall an East Germany that never existed. East Germans are not the only ones who have been buying up re-created products from the former GDR, the youth of East Germany have also been active in remembering their families' past by buying products from the Internet, eating *Spreewälder Gurken*, having *Ossi Parties*, and watching old DEFA films. Museum

curators of the “Documentation Center for the Everyday Life of the GDR” and “Haus der Geschichte” have been collecting objects and re-interpreting the GDR past. Movies like *Goodbye Lenin!* and TV shows including the *DDR Show* have been produced to show everyday culture in the GDR, making the life of East Germans ‘normal’, but at the same time ‘exotic’. In addition, West German companies have found new economic outlets in the East and have bought up Eastern companies like *Vita Cola* and *Radeberger* beer.

The resurgence of Eastern products, whether reintroduced or recycled from the GDR past has become part of an East German collective memory of the socialist experience and oppositional solidarity towards a Western takeover. Daphne Berdahl writes, “In this sense, nostalgia is about the production of a present rather than the reproduction of a past” (*‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present* 202). Thus collective memory, although situated in the past, was based on the current political and economic culture in Germany. The SED was not able to create a consumer culture comparable to West Germany, but East German memory developed out of the day-to-day experiences with material consumption in the GDR. The GDR artifacts are mnemonic devices to remember the past and represent “an attempt to recuperate, validate and anchor a collective memory of a shared past” (Berdahl, *‘(N)Ostalgie’ for the Present* 203). These articles of material culture have become mementos of a fragmented world and offer East Germans a place of communicative, collective, and cultural remembering, as well as collective forgetting.

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